

Lifeworks

Light of spirit

Almost as if to say, "I'm still here," John Dugdale appears in many of his photographs. HIV positive for almost two decades, Dugdale has suffered numerous bouts of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, as well as strokes and cytomegalovirus (CMV) retinitis that have left him nearly blind. His ongoing battle with illness is reflected in many of his photographs, but so is the beauty that he experiences in life. His work attests to the possibilities of truly *living* with HIV.

Despite total blindness in his right eye and less than 30% vision in the left, Dugdale continues to create images that, once seen, have the ability to linger in the darkness behind closed eyes — perhaps because they were created from this very darkness. Tinged with sadness and infused with a tranquility that has evolved from the chaos of losing light, Dugdale's work demonstrates how a good photographer is able

to *make*, rather than *take* a picture. This is the difference between *looking* at the world and *envisioning* it. Using large-format view cameras, and relying on assistants who help focus, Dugdale produces negatives up to 11" × 14" in size. Then, using the cyanotype printing process developed in the 1840s, he exposes sensitized paper directly to sunlight. The iron salts in the treated paper make brilliant blue-and-white images that have a timeless quality. This process also eliminates Dugdale's exposure to harsh chemicals and allows him to work outside the darkroom.

Not only is the process pulled from the past, but so too is the inspiration for Dugdale's imagery. His work recalls that of image-makers from the earliest days of photography, such as William Henry Fox Talbot and Julia Margaret Cameron, and his gallery shows have often been accompanied by the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

These historical references inject a comfortable familiarity into the work, yet the vision is distinctly Dugdale's. His pictures reflect a world that has survived in a memory that continues to see. He uses the past to express a very modern predicament.

Twenty years ago a diagnosis of HIV infection was considered a death sentence. Even ten years ago, when Dugdale lost his vision, he considered CMV to be an end-stage disease. Today, better treatment options enable many people diagnosed with HIV to enjoy a near-normal lifespan. But Dugdale's work reflects the journey he has gone through and the struggle he continues to face. In *The Clandestine Mind*, Dugdale is seated on the



John Dugdale, 1999. *The clandestine mind*. Cyanotype, 10 cm × 15 cm



John Dugdale, 1999. *Mourning tulips*. Cyanotype, 20 cm × 25 cm

stairs of his farmhouse, holding an open book that he is no longer able to see. The staircase banner dissects his vaporizing body and ascends, like the steps, to someplace unseen above. This is a portrait of a ghost; an image of a man who recognizes the possibility of death and laments the loss of his vision. *Mourning Tulips* shares this same remembrance. As in all of Dugdale's photographs, there is an undeniable celebration of beauty, but the flowers also arc in sadness. They struggle to follow the passing light, like nature seeking, and bowing to, spirituality. It is this spirituality that is the hope of Dugdale's work. His continued survival and artistic progress is not only a reflection of the advancement of medicine, but is perhaps a greater example of how the human spirit overcomes darkness.

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